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ABSTRACT

Curriculum evaluation does not occur in a vacuum, and it is not a single or simple kind of operation. The school board member provides a lay person's view of a program but, because of his knowledge of the school district, is a kind of a bridge between the public and professional educators. This presentation provides a framework for consideration of curriculum change, describes several specific curriculum changes and evaluations undertaken by the author's board, and suggests criteria and devices that could be useful to school board members in changes in their own districts. (Author/MLF)

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HOW TO EVALUATE PROPOSED CURRICULUM CHANGES

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Louise Stoll - Panelist

Evaluation of programs and people is the stickiest task a school board member has. The difference between evaluating curriculum already in existence and that which is merely being proposed is a difference only of degree. It is easier to be honest about and effect change in a proposed program than an operating one, because the vested interests are less entrenched.

This presentation will do three things: First, provide a framework for consideration of curriculum change, second, describe several specific curriculum changes and evaluations which my board has undertaken, and finally, suggest criteria and devices which could be useful to school board members in changes in their own districts.

A Framework for Evaluation of Proposed Curriculum Changes

Evaluation of curriculum does not occur in a vacuum, and it is not a single or simple kind of operation. The board member provides a lay person's view of a program but because of his knowledge of the school district, is a kind of bridge between the public and professional educators. Several kinds of curriculum change occur with regularity in school districts, and evaluation should be appropriate to the kind of change. There is the curriculum change that involves content. This might be the addition of a new subject such as sex education or ethnic studies. There is curriculum change that involves

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only changes in how material is presented - such as the adoption of a new math program. And there are structural changes, such as the creation of alternative schools, or mainstreaming programs for handicapped children. But good evaluation of any kind of curriculum change means trying to understand the impact of the change or proposed change on the school district. The basic considerations are:

- who and how many students are affected
- in what ways are they affected
- what is the cost - or likely cost - of implementing the change, with respect to in-service training, materials, facilities, etc.
- what are the "intangible" or "political" costs of implementing the change, with respect to staff morale, parent cooperation or community opposition etc.

Basic to assessing the impact of any proposed or actual curriculum change is an understanding of the motivation for the change: who wanted it. Proposals for change may come from many sources. In some instances the proposals are optional - the board or administration may reject. But in others, for example in state mandated programs, there may be little or no choice. The state may direct even the detail of class size and professional support staff a program must have. A school board wishing to evaluate negatively such a program must carry its case to the state legislature, or, if it is a federal program to the congress or the Department of H. E. W.

Some curriculum change is initiated at community insistence. Often this occurs in the public arena, at school board meetings. In recent years ethnic studies, women's studies, and child care programs have often been incorporated

into the public shool systems after vocal parent support has been demonstrated.

A third way in which curriculum change may be initiated is by teachers or principals. Teachers occasionally decide that the content of their courses requires upgrading, or that they wish to provide either more uniformity or more diversity in teaching techniques. Alternative schools are sometimes the result of teacher efforts.

Sometimes the Superintendent initiates change. Generally, curriculum changes involving better coordination of programs, are initiated by central office initiation.

Rarely, curriculum change is initiated by a board member.

It is generally the case that the group initiating curriculum change wishes to be involved in evaluation of the program. It is a paradox to be respected and remembered that the group will at the same time be most knowledgeable, and - because committed - most suspect!

It is apparent to anyone who thinks about it that evaluation of curriculum is not a logical and straightforward operation. Education is not a precise science, and does not admit to absolute certainty. The claims of the publishers of math, science, reading curricula are puffed to the limits of human credibility. Standardized achievement test scores, important in some ways, do not tell the whole story, and are easy to skew. It has been demonstrated that any kind of attention focused on people or any change in routines increases productivity for a while.

In addition today we acknowledge that government does not act like a rational man! School district "behavior" is more accurately described by

a set of considerations which explain how organizations in general act. These include

- The assumption the decision maker has all the necessary information.
- The goals of an organization may be complex.
- Decisions are not made by people examining the facts and selecting a best course of action. Rather, a form of bargaining occurs within the organization in response to any new stimulus, and coalitions of people form essentially to protect their own best interests. With regard to anything the critical need of the organization is to accommodate the competing interests of the people involved, to find a "workable" solution, rather than the "best" solution.
- People within an organization work hard to minimize uncertainty in their own careers.
- In all organizations, people have both a formal relationship described by a flow chart and an informal one, which is a network of information exchange and behavior which rests on friendship and class associations.

School districts are organizations that manifest all the characteristics listed above - and some other ones besides. The efforts of the best people to run them with care and sensitivity are thwarted by the inevitable bureaucratic nature of the institution, by the many constraints of state and federal laws, and by extremely diverse public demands.

When a program is being evaluated, all of the organizational rules of behavior are operating. Thus, the Superintendent wishing to institute a reading program, no matter how good, cannot force a level of in-service training

that will create hostility on the part of the teachers. The question for board members to consider is: what sort of evaluation will a Superintendent give to his Board under these circumstances. Is it better to force the new reading method at the price of lowered staff morale? Or is it better to permit the materials to be used by inadequately trained people virtually guaranteeing another kind of failure?

When a curriculum change of any significant kind occurs in a school district, it must be understood as an intrusion into an organization that has its own equilibrium. Departure from the status quo carries implied criticism of the status quo, and of the people there at the time. When toes are stepped on, the following inevitable occurs:

- Some information is suppressed because it is unflattering to the people involved.
- The informal network of communication in a school district sabotage rational efforts at coping with the problem. Thus the teachers at School B will already have second-hand information from the teachers at School A about the tedium of an in-service training program and will be less receptive to the new information.
- The evaluator assigned to a program may be a colleague of those implementing the change and consequently not objective in his or her assessment.
- The level of criticism about a new program may create such waves in a district in terms of parent or staff complaints that it becomes no longer worthwhile to pursue it. Particularly the difficult parts, and the entire curriculum change may become a caricature of itself.

Specific Curriculum Changes and Evaluations in Berkeley

In the district from which I come, there have been in recent years many curriculum changes contemplated and implemented. The components of evaluation varied according to the nature of the change and the motivating forces behind it. For example:

a. Special Education Programs were mandated by the state but designed locally with some strings attached. Depending on the financial straits of the district, and what we could "get away with" the programs which brought most discretionary money for general purpose use were considered best! Where outside money funded the programs, evaluations sent back to funding agencies, as required by the grant, were the result of a kind of district conspiracy and were uniformly excellent - to ensure the money would continue.

b. As a result of a negotiated agreement with teachers, the Superintendent developed a "coordinated" reading program for Berkeley. Teachers served on his committee. Teachers still insist that the program was "mandated from above" and are highly critical of the paperwork and rigidity they perceive in the program. Complaints come to the Board from all sides, making any evaluation exceedingly difficult. The Board is resigned to no evaluation of the program in the first year, or possibly two, and to supporting the Superintendent while the political aspects dominate the scene.

c. A new math program introduced at a number of grade levels in the Berkeley schools has never reached the level of the Board. A math professional in the district directed the selection of the math program. Because it did not represent a severe departure from the way things were and had an attractive

set of books and easy to follow teacher guides, it has been well received. There is no indication that children are learning any better.

d. The District received a $7 million federal grant for setting up alternative schools in 1971. The federal government itself mandated two levels of evaluation; an internal evaluation conducted by the District, and an external evaluation to assess the entire program. The internal evaluators were assigned to specific schools - and became advocates for their programs. They would not assist the school board in ranking the programs in order to eliminate the less successful ones as the money in the programs diminished. The outside evaluation was not shared with the school district until after the critical decisions had to be made and was primarily concerned with how the district adversely affected the project.

e. Compensatory Education has been in Berkeley for over ten years, and ESAA for three. Test results indicate that low achieving youngsters in the programs do worse than equally low achieving youngsters not in the program. Yet the parents and teachers who have the power under federal and state regulations, to develop these programs continue to insist that they are good. Since a number of people have been hired with these funds and the elimination of the funds would mean the end of their jobs, a vocal and powerful public lobbying force exists whose purpose is to insist that despite the test results, the "intangible" benefits of the program should prevail. This is an example of failure being rewarded!

f. Another curricular change involves Early Childhood Education (ECE) sponsored by the State of California. In this program a state team annually assesses whether or not each program is carrying out its plans. In a given

school district only one or two schools have ECE funds for pilot projects. In order to receive additional funds to set up a program in another school, the district must receive "good marks" from a state evaluation team for its existing programs. While this is often a formalistic assessment, it is an example of success being rewarded.

g. Berkeley has recently embarked upon two studies directed toward improving curriculum. The school board has set up two task forces of parents and staff to examine existing High School graduation requirements, and the music program, and make recommendations for changes. The music report was made recently and contains numerous suggestions for beneficial and efficient changes.

Perhaps the most ambitious curriculum development in Berkeley is the restructuring of the intermediate schools, serving grades 4 thru 6. The motivation for this change came from parents who spoke with their feet - we experienced a sharp decline in enrollment between the primary schools and the 4th grade. To the eye, the intermediate schools were ugly, much larger than the primary schools and the curriculum was uninteresting. A parent-teacher task force racially and sexually balanced, was established to report to the Superintendent and develop a plan for sprucing up the overall program. During the first committee meeting, nearly all of the teachers walked out, highly threatened by parental criticism of the schools even though the very existence of the committee spoke to the need for change. For several months the committee functioned with no teachers present. In the end the Superintendent proposed a plan for reorganizing the schools into mini schools and the committee agreed. Additional funds were earmarked for

maintenance at the committee's request and a coordinated reading program with reading specialists was instituted. Teachers resisted the in-service training necessary for learning the new reading management techniques; at least one principal subtly resisted the mini or team organizational plan by merely assigning team teachers to rooms at opposite ends of the building. The Board made an unusual decision after the 4 - 6 plan was implemented, and asked the Task Force to stay intact to monitor the program and report back to the Board. A candid report stating in part that many students were unaware that they had access to four or five teachers instead of one has generated some changes in the in-service training program with the Board directing additional contact with youngsters for all of the adults in the school, and in a general awareness that parents will continue to report back to the Board instances of subtle and unsubtle sabotage of the program.

Criteria and Mechanisms for Evaluating Curriculum Changes

What, then should a Board do when confronted with proposed curriculum changes to determine if the best interest of the district is being served? Remember, first of all, that most curriculum changes do not require elaborate evaluation.

For major program changes, it is important that there be a clearly felt advocacy for the change. If too many people are opposed, the coalition which they form both within the institution and in conjunction with citizens makes implementation - and hence assessment-impossible. In considering any proposed major curriculum change it is important to try to anticipate the angles

from which criticism will come - to buy it off before beginning! The Board must:

- Consider whether there is a situation in the district which needs addressing.
- Assess the ripeness of the situation: Whether or not the district is in fact ready for the change.
- Consider the special interest groups who are either out to disrupt, out to co-opt, out to ensure that their own person will be hired to head the program.
- Consider whether or not outside money is available.
- Consider whether or not the Superintendent or a trusted designee has the expertise to in fact carry off the new program and
- Consider whether or not a climate of encouragement for teachers changing their ways exists in the district.
- Consider what programs must be dropped to find the resources for the new program.

Sometimes, it is helpful to contract for an <u>independent</u> evaluation of existing curriculum in a particular subject, or even over the district. Often such outside evaluations do not reveal anything new, but do lend legitimacy to proposals for curriculum change because they are perceived as objective.

With respect to implementation of new curriculum, the use of a citizen monitoring team has proven a valuable tool. It is important that such a monitoring team have a calendar for regular reporting to the administrator and Board and that the team's activities are concluded after

a given length of time.

Periodically all major subject areas should have the kind of citizen monitoring that Berkeley has set up in its Music Program, High School graduation requirements, and Intermediate Schools.

Finally, Board members must remember that, despite their desire to announce with certainty that a proposed curriculum change will be good, uncertainty prevails. The organizational behavior of school districts, and the lowly state of the art of evaluating programs makes the process soft. The criteria which I have come to use argue for a curriculum change if:

- Children are not likely to be worse off.
- There is parental support for it.
- A cost benefit analysis reveals to the extent possible what the absolute costs, as well as the per pupil cost are, so I understand the fiscal implications.
- There hasn't been change in a while, and people are bored.
- The basic skills test scores are no worse than test scores of other programs.
- The existence of the program symbolizes something important even though objectively there may be no meaning at all.
- The complexity of implementing the new program - facilities, staff training, staff morale, community politics, are not so time consuming that they bring the district to a halt.

The criteria in the end are not hard and fast. But that is how it should be, for teaching is far more an art than a science, and the ingredients of change vary greatly with the community, the motivating factors for the

change, and the existing state of affairs in the district. As policy makers, Board members should not undertake major curriculum changes without being conscious of what they are in fact doing, and while you cannot predict always the importance or true impact of a curriculum change on the total operations of a district, one can by analyzing the expected or actual change within the framework offerred here, have a better idea of what you are getting yourself into!

LS/jf